OVER a
WOOD FIRE
By
IK MARVEL

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REVERIES OF A BACHELOR

"Would not all that boyhood prized enthusiasm renew itself in such presence!"

—Page 22

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FROM

REVERIES OF A BACHELOR

BY

IK. MARVEL
(DONALD G. MITCHELL)

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FIRST REVERIE

Smoke, Flame and Ashes

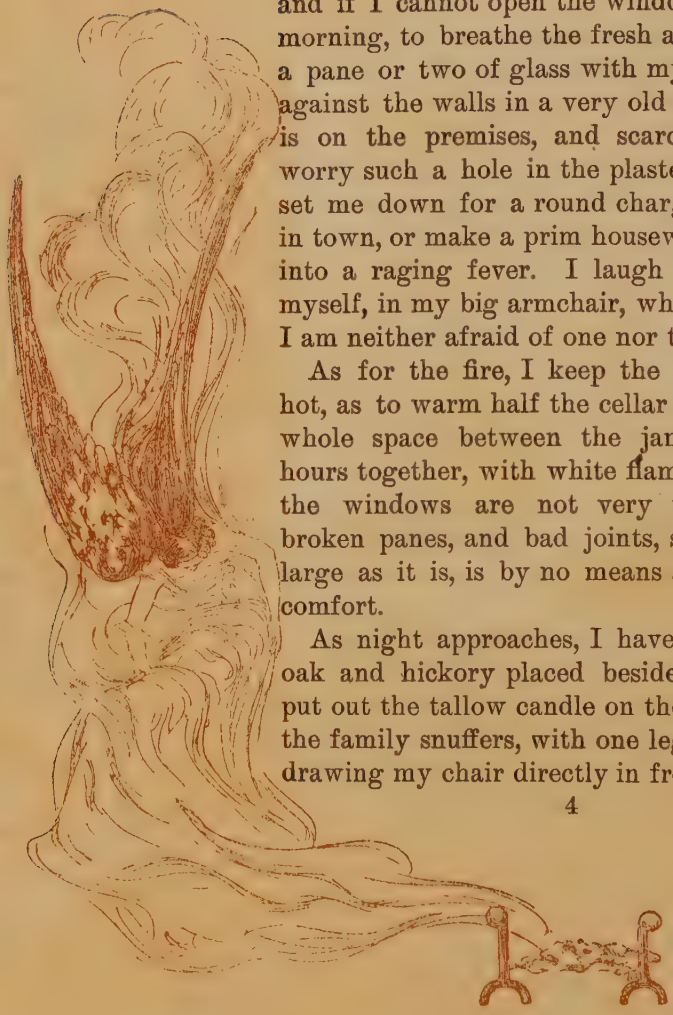
Over a Wood Fire

I HAVE got a quiet farmhouse in the country, a very humble place to be sure, tenanted by a worthy enough man, of the old New England stamp, where I sometimes go for a day or two in the winter, to look over the farm-accounts, and to see how the stock is thriving on the winter's keep.

One side the door, as you enter from the porch, is a little parlor, scarce twelve feet by ten, with a cozy looking fireplace—a heavy oak floor—a couple of armchairs and a brown table with carved lions' feet. Out of this room opens a little cabinet, only big enough for a broad bachelor bedstead, where I sleep upon feathers, and wake in the morning, with my eye upon a saucy colored, lithographic print of some fancy "Bessy."

It happens to be the only house in the world, of which I am *bona-fide* owner; and I take a vast deal of comfort in treating it just as I

choose. I manage to break some article of furniture, almost every time I pay it a visit; and if I cannot open the window readily of a morning, to breathe the fresh air, I knock out a pane or two of glass with my boot. I lean against the walls in a very old armchair there is on the premises, and scarce ever fail to worry such a hole in the plastering, as would set me down for a round charge for damages in town, or make a prim housewife fret herself into a raging fever. I laugh out loud with myself, in my big armchair, when I think that I am neither afraid of one nor the other.



As for the fire, I keep the little hearth so hot, as to warm half the cellar below, and the whole space between the jambs, roars for hours together, with white flame. To be sure the windows are not very tight, between broken panes, and bad joints, so that the fire, large as it is, is by no means an extravagant comfort.

As night approaches, I have a huge pile of oak and hickory placed beside the hearth; I put out the tallow candle on the mantel (using the family snuffers, with one leg broken) then, drawing my chair directly in front of the blaz-

"My only measure of time is the blaze of my fire."

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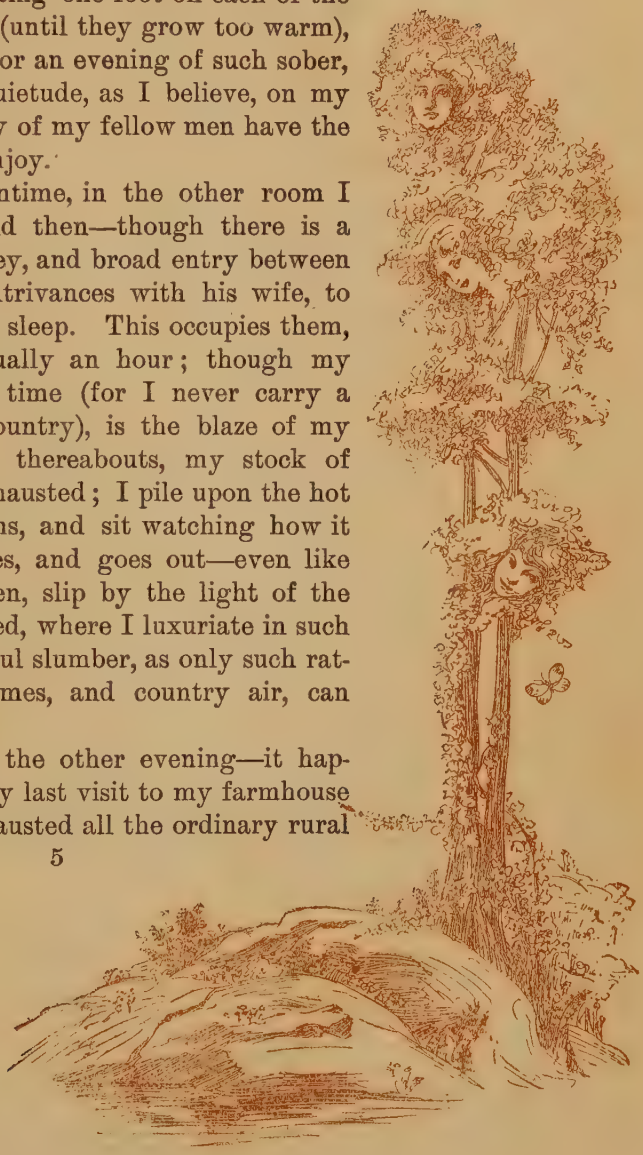
ing wood, and setting one foot on each of the old iron fire-dogs (until they grow too warm), I dispose myself for an evening of such sober, and thoughtful quietude, as I believe, on my soul, that very few of my fellow men have the good fortune to enjoy.

My tenant meantime, in the other room I can hear now and then—though there is a thick stone chimney, and broad entry between—multiplying contrivances with his wife, to put two babies to sleep. This occupies them, I should say, usually an hour; though my only measure of time (for I never carry a watch into the country), is the blaze of my fire. By ten, or thereabouts, my stock of wood is nearly exhausted; I pile upon the hot coals what remains, and sit watching how it kindles, and blazes, and goes out—even like our joys! and then, slip by the light of the embers into my bed, where I luxuriate in such sound, and healthful slumber, as only such rattling window frames, and country air, can supply.

But to return: the other evening—it happened to be on my last visit to my farmhouse—when I had exhausted all the ordinary rural



topics of thought, had formed all sorts of conjectures as to the income of the year; had planned a new wall around one lot, and the clearing up of another, now covered with patriarchal wood; and wondered if the little rickety house would not be after all a snug enough box, to live and to die in—I fell on a sudden into such an unprecedented line of thought, which took such a deep hold of my sympathies—sometimes even starting tears—that I determined, the next day, to set as much of it as I could recall, on paper.

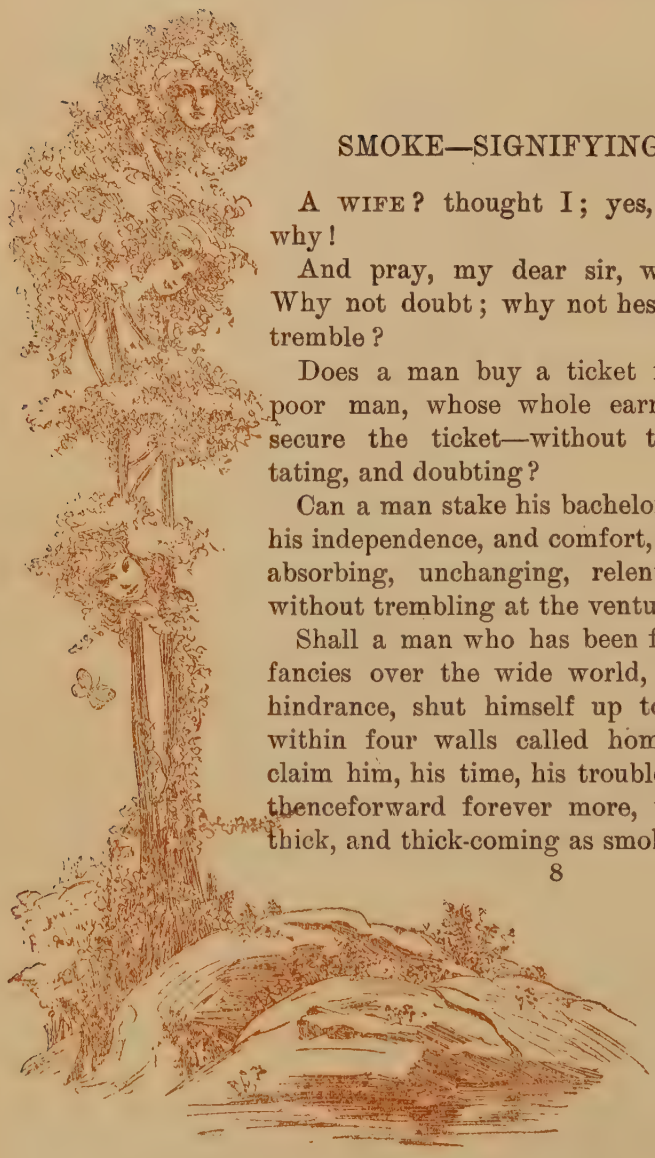
Something—it may have been the home-looking blaze (I am a bachelor of—say six and twenty), or possibly a plaintive cry of the baby in my tenant's room, had suggested to me the thought of—Marriage.

I piled upon the heated fire-dogs, the last armful of my wood; and now, said I, bracing myself courageously between the arms of my chair—I'll not flinch; I'll pursue the thought wherever it leads, though it lead me to the d—— (I am apt to be hasty) at least—continued I, softening—until my fire is out.

The wood was green, and at first showed no disposition to blaze. It smoked furiously.

Over a Wood Fire

Smoke, thought I, always goes before blaze; and so does doubt go before decision: and my reverie, from that very starting point, slipped into this shape:



SMOKE—SIGNIFYING DOUBT

A WIFE? thought I; yes, a wife! And why!

And pray, my dear sir, why not—why? Why not doubt; why not hesitate; why not tremble?

Does a man buy a ticket in a lottery—a poor man, whose whole earnings go in to secure the ticket—without trembling, hesitating, and doubting?

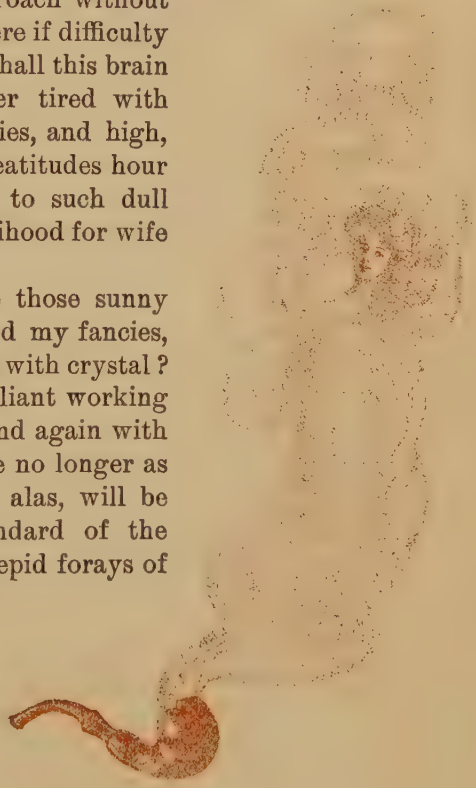
Can a man stake his bachelor respectability, his independence, and comfort, upon the die of absorbing, unchanging, relentless marriage, without trembling at the venture?

Shall a man who has been free to chase his fancies over the wide world, without let or hindrance, shut himself up to marriageship, within four walls called home, that are to claim him, his time, his trouble, and his tears, thenceforward forever more, without doubts thick, and thick-coming as smoke?

Over a Wood Fire

Shall he who has been hitherto a mere observer of other men's cares and business, moving off where they made him sick of heart, approaching whenever and wherever they made him gleeful—shall he now undertake administration of just such cares and business without qualms? Shall he, whose whole life has been but a nimble succession of escapes from trifling difficulties, now broach without doubtings—that matrimony, where if difficulty beset him there is no escape? Shall this brain of mine, careless-working, never tired with idleness, feeding on long vagaries, and high, gigantic castles, dreaming out beatitudes hour by hour—turn itself at length to such dull task-work, as thinking out a livelihood for wife and children?

Where thenceforward will be those sunny dreams, in which I have warmed my fancies, and my heart, and lighted my eye with crystal? This very marriage, which a brilliant working imagination has invested time and again with brightness, and delight, can serve no longer as a mine for teeming fancy: all, alas, will be gone—reduced to the dull standard of the actual! No more room for intrepid forays of



imagination—no more gorgeous realm-making—all will be over!

Why not, I thought, go on dreaming?

Can any wife be prettier than an after dinner fancy, idle and yet vivid, can paint for you? Can any children make less noise, than the little rosy-cheeked ones, who have no existence, except in the *omnium gatherum* of your own brain? Can any housewife be more unexceptionable than she who goes sweeping daintily the cobwebs that gather in your dreams? Can any domestic larder be better stocked, than the private larder of your head dozing on a cushioned chair-back at Delmonico's? Can any family purse be better filled than the exceeding plump one you dream of, after reading such pleasant books as Munchausen, or Typee?

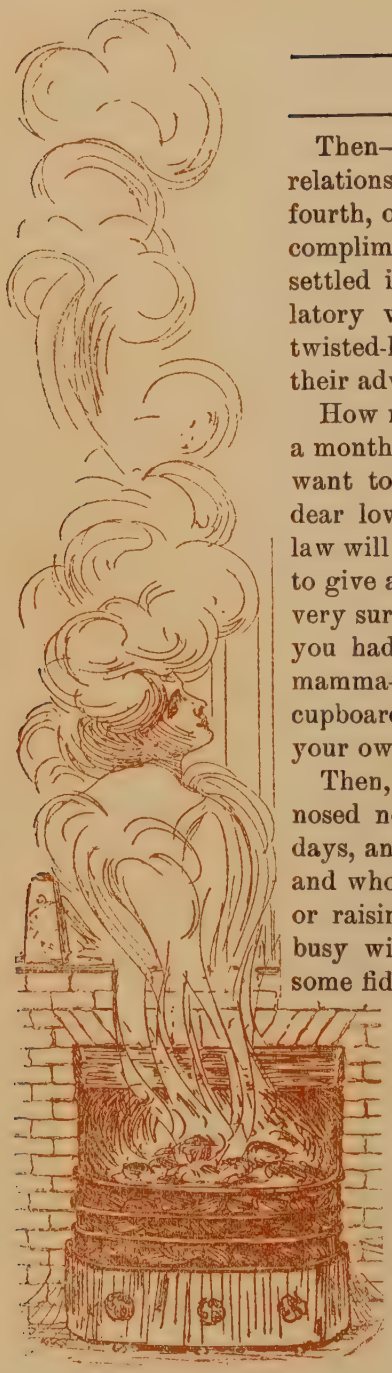
But if, after all, it must be—duty, or what-not, making provocation—what then? And I clapped my feet hard against the fire-dogs, and leaned back, and turned my face to the ceiling, as much as to say: And where on earth, then, shall a poor devil look for a wife?

Somebody says, Lyttleton or Shaftesbury, I think, that, "marriages would be happier if

they were all arranged by the lord chancellor." Unfortunately, we have no lord chancellor to make this commutation of our misery.

Shall a man, then, scour the country on a mule's back, like Honest Gil Blas, of Santillane; or shall he make application to some such intervening providence as Madame St. Marc, who, as I see by the *Presse*, manages these matters to one's hand, for some five per cent. on the fortunes of the parties?

I have trouted, when the brook was so low, and the sky so hot, that I might as well have thrown my fly upon the turnpike; and I have hunted hare at noon, and woodcock in snow-time—never despairing, scarce doubting; but for a poor hunter of his kind, without traps or snares, or any aid of police or constabulary, to traverse the world, where are swarming, on a moderate computation, some three hundred and odd millions of unmarried women, for a single capture—irremediable, unchangeable—and yet a captive which by strange metonymy, not laid down in the books, is very apt to turn captor into captive, and make game of hunter—all this, surely, surely may make a man shrug with doubt!



Then—again—there are the plaguey wife's-relations. Who knows how many third, fourth, or fifth cousins will appear at careless, complimentary intervals long after you had settled into the placid belief that all congratulatory visits were at an end? How many twisted-headed brothers will be putting in their advice, as a friend to Peggy?

How many maiden aunts will come to spend a month or two with their "dear Peggy," and want to know every tea-time, "if she isn't a dear love of a wife?" Then, dear father-in-law will beg (taking dear Peggy's hand in his), to give a little wholesome counsel; and will be very sure to advise just the contrary of what you had determined to undertake. And dear mamma-in-law must set her nose into Peggy's cupboard, and insist upon having the key to your own private locker in the wainscot.

Then, perhaps, there is a little bevy of dirty-nosed nephews who come to spend the holidays, and eat up your East India sweetmeats; and who are forever tramping over your head or raising the old Harry below, while you are busy with your clients. Last, and worst, is some fidgety old uncle, forever too cold or too

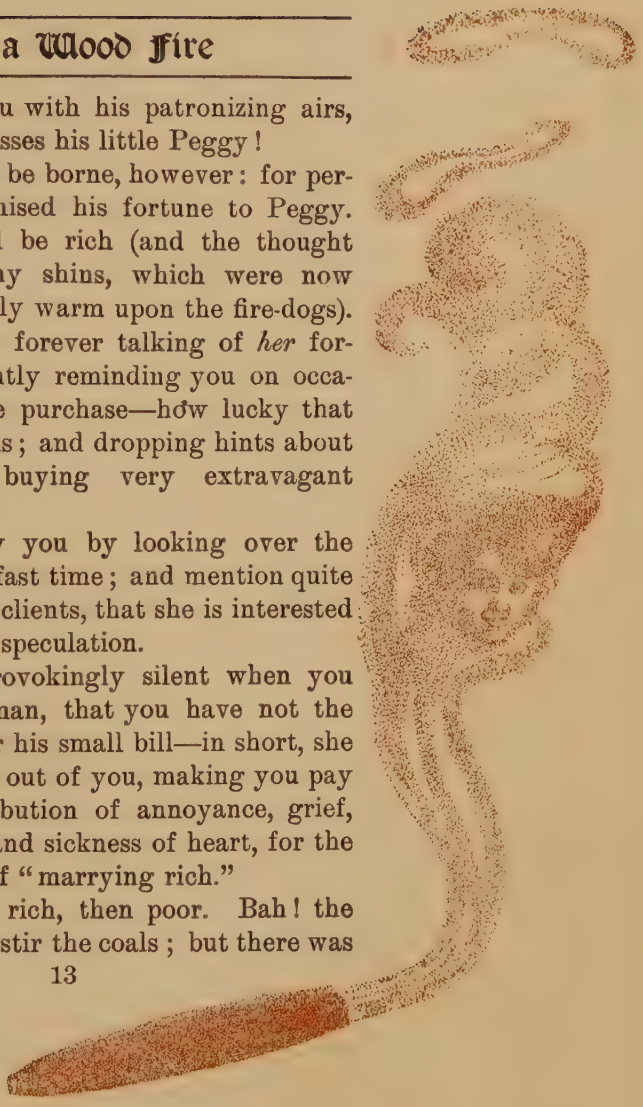
hot, who vexes you with his patronizing airs, and impudently kisses his little Peggy!

——That could be borne, however: for perhaps he has promised his fortune to Peggy. Peggy, then, will be rich (and the thought made me rub my shins, which were now getting comfortably warm upon the fire-dogs). Then, she will be forever talking of *her* fortune; and pleasantly reminding you on occasion of a favorite purchase—how lucky that *she* had the means; and dropping hints about economy; and buying very extravagant Paisleys.

She will annoy you by looking over the stock-list at breakfast time; and mention quite carelessly to your clients, that she is interested in *such*, or such a speculation.

She will be provokingly silent when you hint to a tradesman, that you have not the money by you, for his small bill—in short, she will tear the life out of you, making you pay in righteous retribution of annoyance, grief, vexation, shame, and sickness of heart, for the superlative folly of "marrying rich."

——But if not rich, then poor. Bah! the thought made me stir the coals; but there was



still no blaze. The paltry earnings you are able to wring out of clients by the sweat of your brow, will now be all *our* income; you will be pestered for pin-money, and pestered with your poor wife's relations. Ten to one, she will stickle about taste—"Sir Visto's"—and want to make this so pretty, and that so charming, if she *only* had the means; and is sure Paul (a kiss) can't deny his little Peggy such a trifling sum, and all for the common benefit.

Then she, for one, means that *her* children shan't go a-begging for clothes—and another pull at the purse. Trust a poor mother to dress her children in finery!

Perhaps she is ugly—not noticeable at first; but growing on her, and (what is worse) growing faster on you. You wonder why you didn't see that vulgar nose long ago: and that lip—it is very strange, you think, that you ever thought it pretty. And then—to come to breakfast, with her hair looking as it does, and you, not so much as daring to say—"Peggy, *do* brush your hair!" Her foot, too—not very bad when decently *chaussée*—but now, since she's married, she does wear such infernal

slippers! And yet, for all this, to be prigging up for an hour, when any of my old chums come to dine with me!

"Bless your kind hearts! my dear fellows," said I, thrusting the tongs into the coals, and speaking out loud, as if my voice could reach from Virginia to Paris—"not married yet!"

Perhaps Peggy is pretty enough — only shrewish.

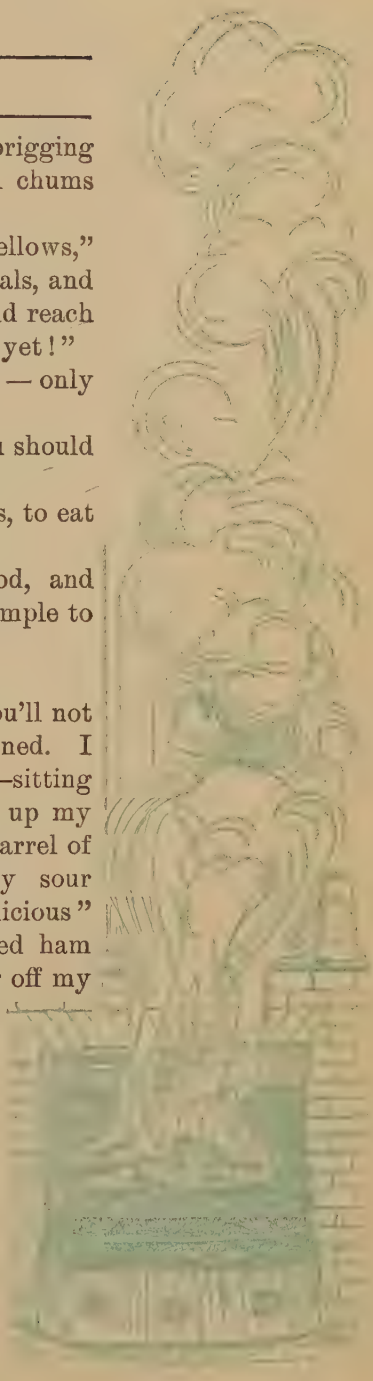
——No matter for cold coffee; you should have been up before.

What sad, thin, poorly cooked chops, to eat with your rolls!

——She thinks they are very good, and wonders how you can set such an example to your children.

The butter is nauseating.

——She has no other, and hopes you'll not raise a storm about butter a little turned. I think I see myself—ruminated I—sitting meekly at table, scarce daring to lift up my eyes, utterly fagged out with some quarrel of yesterday, choking down detestably sour muffins, that my wife thinks are "delicious" —slipping in dried mouthfuls of burned ham off the side of my fork tines—slipping off my



chair side-ways at the end, and slipping out with my hat between my knees, to business, and never feeling myself a competent, sound-minded man, till the oak door is between me and Peggy!

—"Ha, ha—not yet!" said I; and in so earnest a tone, that my dog started to his feet —cocked his eye to have a good look into my face—met my smile of triumph with an amiable wag of the tail, and curled up again in the corner.

Again, Peggy is rich enough, well enough, mild enough, only she doesn't care a fig for you. She has married you because father, or grandfather thought the match eligible, and because she didn't wish to disoblige them. Besides, she didn't positively hate you, and thought you were a respectable enough young person; she has told you so repeatedly at dinner. She wonders you like to read poetry; she wishes you would buy her a good cook-book; and insists upon you making your will at the birth of the first baby.

She thinks Captain So-and-So a splendid looking fellow, and wishes you would trim up a little, were it only for appearance' sake.

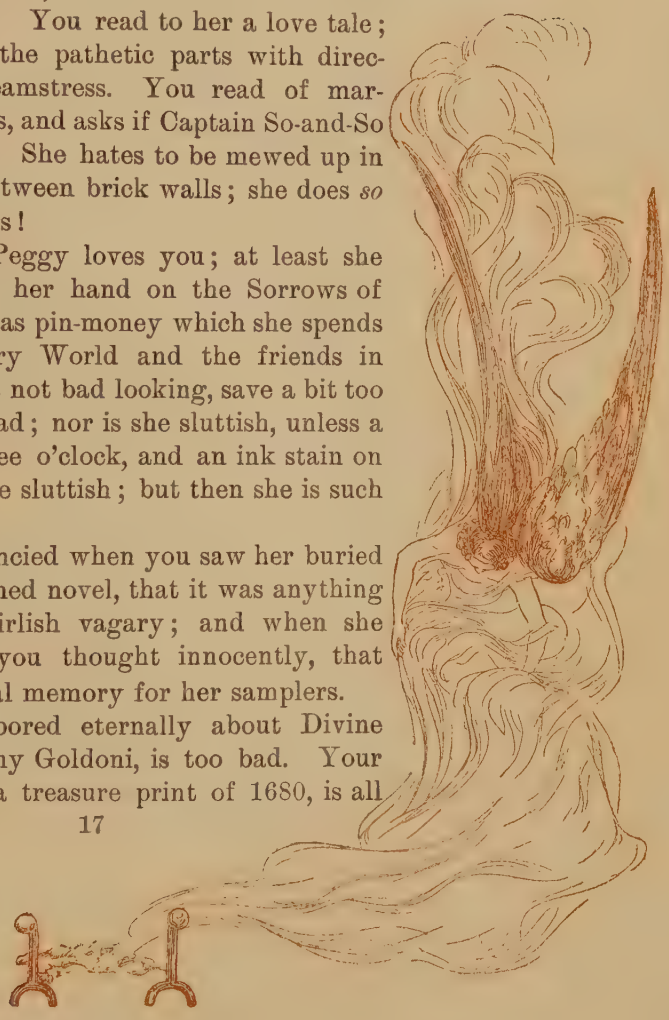
Over a Wood Fire

You need not hurry up from the office so early at night: she, bless her dear heart! does not feel lonely. You read to her a love tale; she interrupts the pathetic parts with directions to her seamstress. You read of marriages: she sighs, and asks if Captain So-and-So has left town! She hates to be mewed up in a cottage, or between brick walls; she does *so* love the Springs!

But, again, Peggy loves you; at least she swears it, with her hand on the Sorrows of Werter. She has pin-money which she spends for the Literary World and the friends in council. She is not bad looking, save a bit too much of forehead; nor is she sluttish, unless a *negligé* till three o'clock, and an ink stain on the forefinger be sluttish; but then she is such a sad blue!

You never fancied when you saw her buried in a three volumed novel, that it was anything more than a girlish vagary; and when she quoted Latin, you thought innocently, that she had a capital memory for her samplers.

But to be bored eternally about Divine Dantè and funny Goldoni, is too bad. Your copy of Tasso, a treasure print of 1680, is all



bethumbed and dog's eared, and spotted with baby gruel. Even your Seneca—an Elzevir—is all sweaty with handling. She adores La Fontaine, reads Balzac with a kind of artist-scowl, and will not let Greek alone.

You hint at broken rest and an aching head at breakfast, and she will fling you a scrap of anthology—in lieu of the camphor bottle—or chant the *aἰaῖ aἰaῖ*, of tragic chorus.

——The nurse is getting dinner; you are holding the baby; Peggy is reading Bruyère.

The fire smoked thick as pitch, and puffed out little clouds over the chimney piece. I gave the fork-stick a kick, at the thought of Peggy, baby and Bruyère.

——Suddenly the flames flickered bluely athwart the smoke—caught at a twig below—rolled round the mossy oak-stick—twined among the crackling tree-limbs—mounted—lit up the whole body of smoke, and blazed out cheerily and bright. Doubt vanished with Smoke, and Hope began with Flame.

Over a Wood Fire

BLAZE—SIGNIFYING CHEER

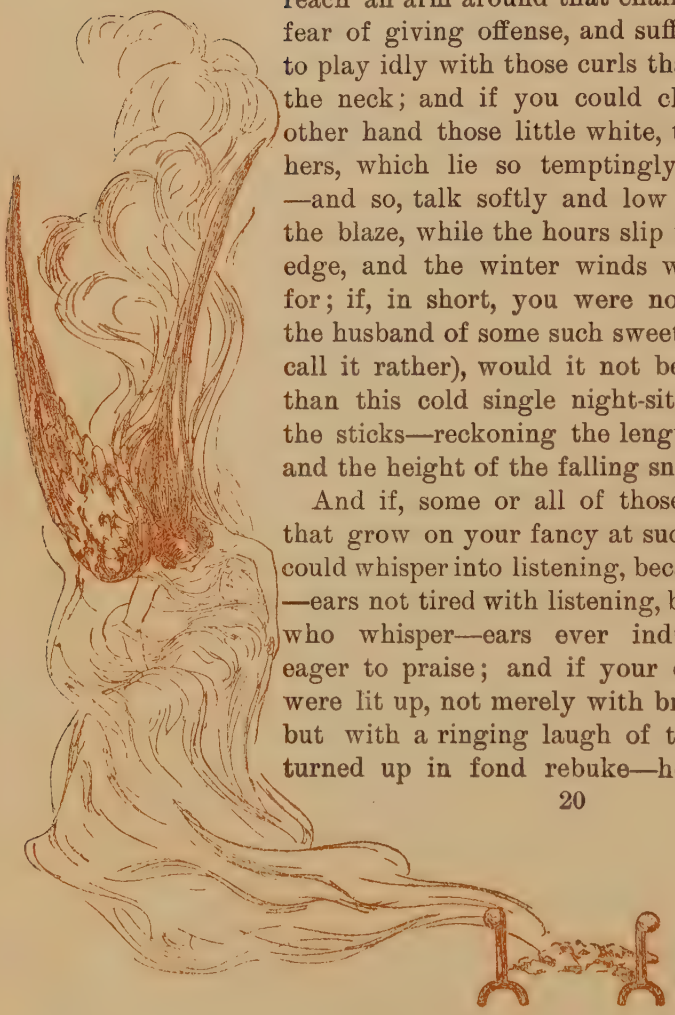
I PUSHED my chair back; drew up another; stretched out my feet cozily upon it, rested my elbows on the chair arms, leaned my head on one hand, and looked straight into the leaping, and dancing flame.

——Love is a flame—ruminated I; and (glancing round the room) how a flame brightens up a man's habitation.

"Carlo," said I, calling up my dog into the light, "good fellow, Carlo!" and I patted him kindly, and he wagged his tail, and laid his nose across my knee, and looked wistfully up in my face; then strode away—turned to look again, and lay down to sleep.

"Pho, the brute!" said I, "it is not enough after all, to like a dog."

——If now in that chair yonder, not the one your feet lie upon, but the other, beside you—closer yet—were seated a sweet-faced girl, with a pretty little foot lying out upon the hearth—a bit of lace running round the swelling throat—



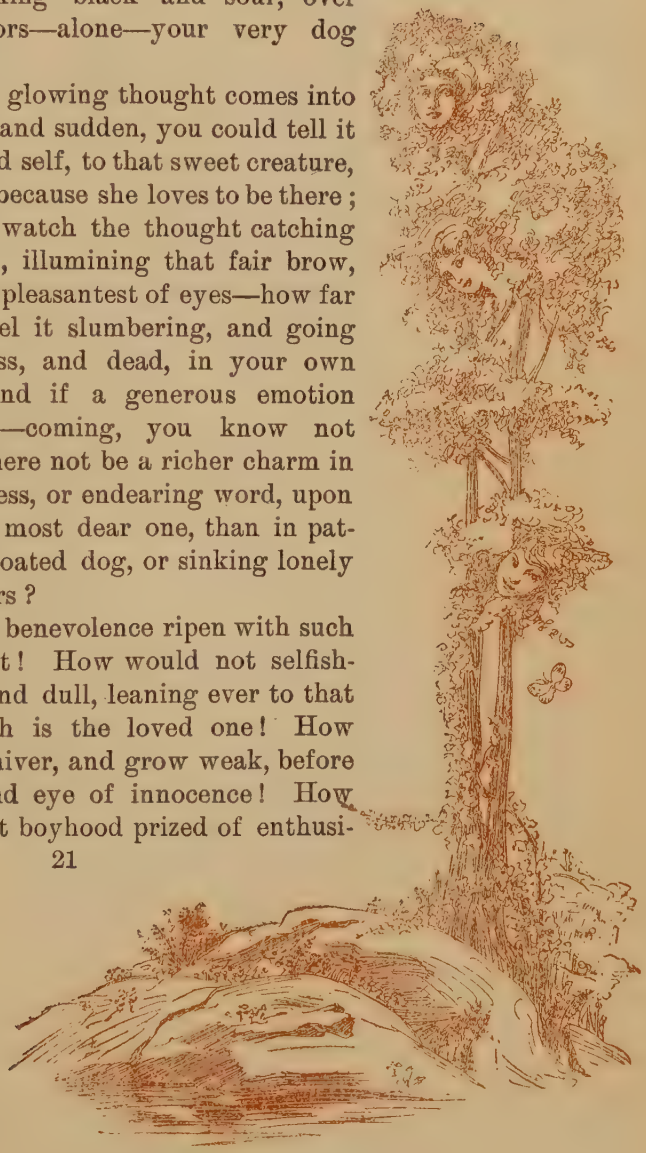
the hair parted to a charm over a forehead fair as any of your dreams; and if you could reach an arm around that chair back, without fear of giving offense, and suffer your fingers to play idly with those curls that escape down the neck; and if you could clasp with your other hand those little white, taper fingers of hers, which lie so temptingly within reach —and so, talk softly and low in presence of the blaze, while the hours slip without knowledge, and the winter winds whistle uncared for; if, in short, you were no bachelor, but the husband of some such sweet image (dream, call it rather), would it not be far pleasanter than this cold single night-sitting—counting the sticks—reckoning the length of the blaze, and the height of the falling snow?

And if, some or all of those wild vagaries that grow on your fancy at such an hour, you could whisper into listening, because loving ears —ears not tired with listening, because it is you who whisper—ears ever indulgent because eager to praise; and if your darkest fancies were lit up, not merely with bright wood-fire, but with a ringing laugh of that sweet face turned up in fond rebuke—how far better,

than to be waxing black and sour, over pestilential humors—alone—your very dog asleep.

And if when a glowing thought comes into your brain, quick and sudden, you could tell it over as to a second self, to that sweet creature, who is not away, because she loves to be there; and if you could watch the thought catching that girlish mind, illumining that fair brow, sparkling in those pleasantest of eyes—how far better than to feel it slumbering, and going out, heavy, lifeless, and dead, in your own selfish fancy. And if a generous emotion steals over you—coming, you know not whither, would there not be a richer charm in lavishing it in caress, or endearing word, upon that fondest, and most dear one, than in patting your glossy-coated dog, or sinking lonely to smiling slumbers?

How would not benevolence ripen with such monitor to task it! How would not selfishness grow faint and dull, leaning ever to that second self, which is the loved one! How would not guile shiver, and grow weak, before that girl-brow, and eye of innocence! How would not all that boyhood prized of enthusi-



asm, and quick blood, and life, renew itself in such presence!

The fire was getting hotter, and I moved into the middle of the room. The shadows the flames made, were playing like fairy forms over floor, and wall, and ceiling.

My fancy would surely quicken, thought I, if such being were in attendance. Surely imagination would be stronger, and purer, if it could have the playful fancies of dawning womanhood to delight it. All toil would be torn from mind-labor, if but another heart grew into this present soul, quickening it, warming it, cheering it, bidding it ever—God speed!

Her face would make a halo, rich as a rainbow, atop of all such noisome things, as we lonely souls call trouble. Her smile would illumine the blackest of crowding cares; and darkness that now seats you despondent, in your solitary chair for days together, weaving bitter fancies, dreaming bitter dreams, would grow light and thin, and spread, and float away—chased by that beloved smile.

Your friend—poor fellow! dies: never mind, that gentle clasp of *her* fingers, as she steals

behind you, telling you not to weep—it is worth ten friends!

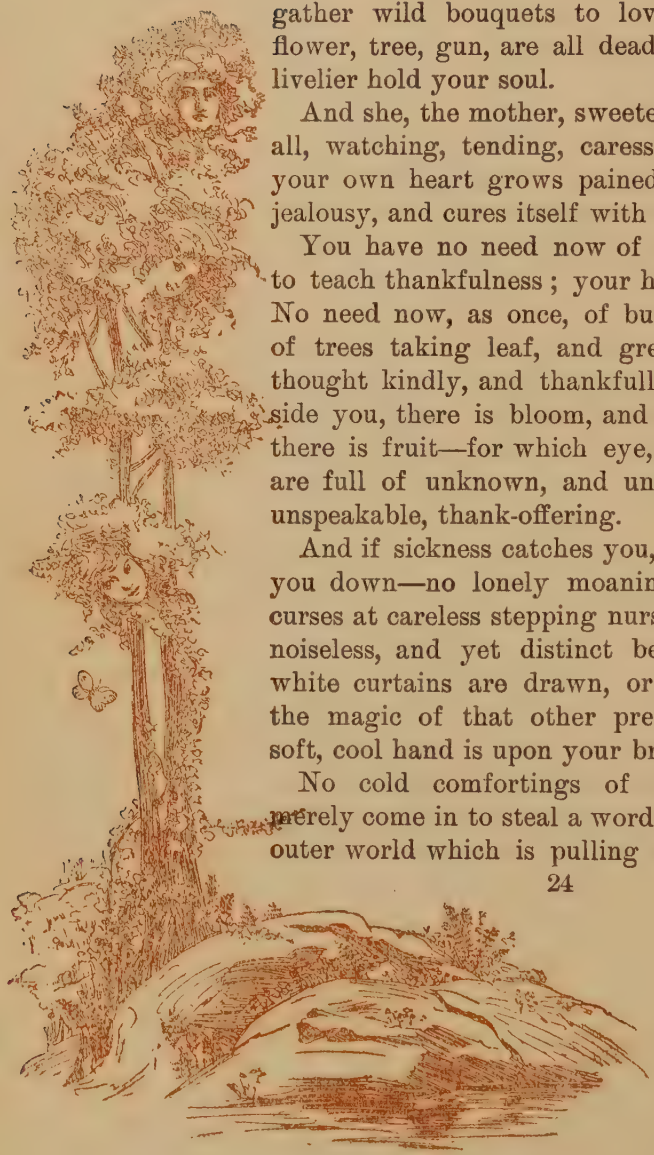
Your sister, sweet one, is dead—buried. The worms are busy with all her fairness. How it makes you think earth nothing but a spot to dig graves upon!

——It is more: *she*, she says, will be a sister; and the waving curls as she leans upon your shoulder, touch your cheek, and your wet eyes turn to meet those other eyes—God has sent his angel, surely!

Your mother, alas for it, she is gone! Is there any bitterness to a youth, alone, and homeless, like this!

But you are not homeless; you are not alone: *she* is there—her tears softening yours, her smile lighting yours, her grief killing yours; and you live again, to assuage that kind sorrow of hers.

Then—those children, rosy, fair-haired; no, they do not disturb you with their prattle now—they are yours! Toss away there on the greensward—never mind the hyacinths, the snowdrops, the violets, if so be any are there; the perfume of their healthful lips is worth all the flowers of the world. No need now to



gather wild bouquets to love, and cherish: flower, tree, gun, are all dead things; things livelier hold your soul.

And she, the mother, sweetest and fairest of all, watching, tending, caressing, loving, till your own heart grows pained with tenderest jealousy, and cures itself with loving.

You have no need now of any cold lecture to teach thankfulness; your heart is full of it. No need now, as once, of bursting blossoms, of trees taking leaf, and greenness, to turn thought kindly, and thankfully; for, ever beside you, there is bloom, and ever beside you there is fruit—for which eye, heart, and soul are full of unknown, and unspoken, because unspeakable, thank-offering.

And if sickness catches you, binds you, lays you down—no lonely moanings, and wicked curses at careless stepping nurses. *The* step is noiseless, and yet distinct beside you. The white curtains are drawn, or withdrawn by the magic of that other presence; and the soft, cool hand is upon your brow.

No cold comfortings of friend-watchers, merely come in to steal a word away from that outer world which is pulling at their skirts;

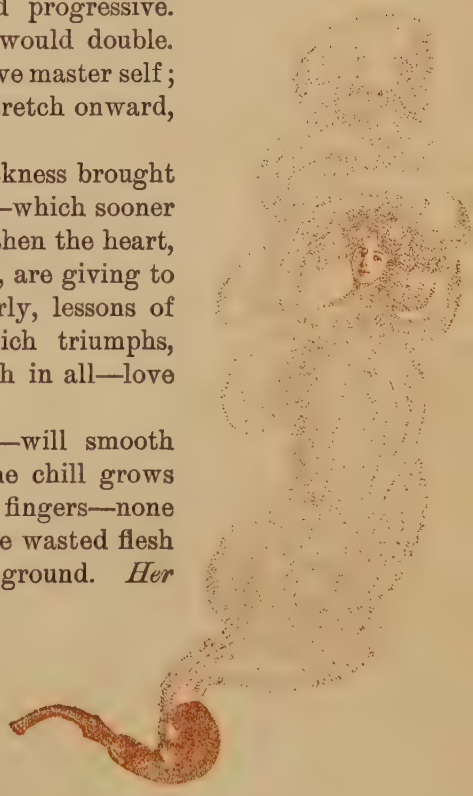
but, ever the sad, shaded brow of her, whose lightest sorrow for your sake is your greatest grief—if it were not a greater joy.

The blaze was leaping light and high, and the wood falling under the growing heat.

——So, continued I, this heart would be at length itself—striving with everything gross, even now as it clings to grossness. Love would make its strength native and progressive. Earth's cares would fly. Joys would double. Susceptibilities be quickened; love master self; and having made the mastery, stretch onward, and upward towards infinitude.

And if the end came, and sickness brought that follower—Great Follower—which sooner or later is sure to come after, then the heart, and the hand of love, ever near, are giving to your tired soul, daily and hourly, lessons of that love which consoles, which triumphs, which circleth all, and centereth in all—love infinite and divine!

Kind hands—none but *hers*—will smooth the hair upon your brow as the chill grows damp, and heavy on it; and her fingers—none but hers—will lie in yours as the wasted flesh stiffens, and hardens for the ground. *Her*



tears—you could feel no others, if oceans fell—will warm your drooping features once more to life; once more your eye lighted in joyous triumph, kindle in her smile, and then ——

The fire fell upon the hearth; the blaze gave a last leap—a flicker—then another—caught a little remaining twig—blazed up—wavered—went out.

There was nothing but a bed of glowing embers, over which the white ashes gathered fast. I was alone, with only my dog for company.

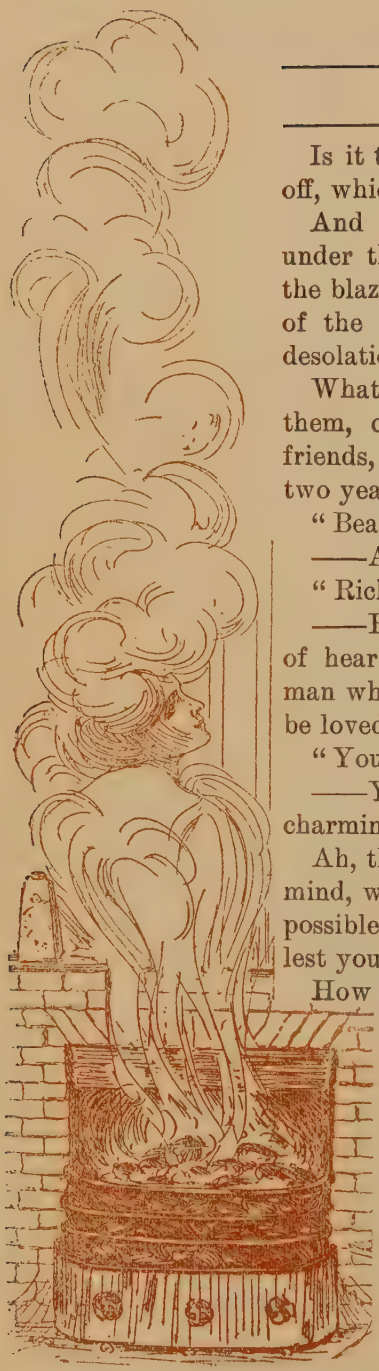
ASHES—SIGNIFYING DESOLATION

After all, thought I, ashes follow blaze inevitably as death follows life. Misery treads on the heels of joy; anguish rides swift after pleasure.

"Come to me again, Carlo," said I to my dog; and I patted him fondly once more, but now only by the light of the dying embers.

It is very little pleasure one takes in fondling brute favorites; but it is a pleasure that when it passes, leaves no void. It is only a little alleviating redundance in your solitary heart-life, which if lost, another can be supplied.

But if your heart, not solitary—not quieting its humors with mere love of chase, or dog—not repressing year after year, its earnest yearnings after something better, and more spiritual—has fairly linked itself by bonds strong as life, to another heart—is the casting off easy then?



Is it then only a little heart-redundancy cut off, which the next bright sunset will fill up?

And my fancy, as it had painted doubt under the smoke, and cheer under warmth of the blaze, so now it began under the faint light of the smoldering embers, to picture heart-desolation.

What kind, congratulatory letters, hosts of them, coming from old and half-forgotten friends, now that your happiness is a year, or two years old!

"Beautiful."

——Ay, to be sure, beautiful!

"Rich."

——Pho, the dawdler! how little he knows of heart-treasure, who speaks of wealth to a man who loves his wife, as a wife only should be loved!

"Young."

——Young indeed; guileless as infancy; charming as the morning.

Ah, these letters bear a sting: they bring to mind, with new and newer freshness, if it be possible, the value of that, which you tremble lest you lose.

How anxiously you watch that step—if it

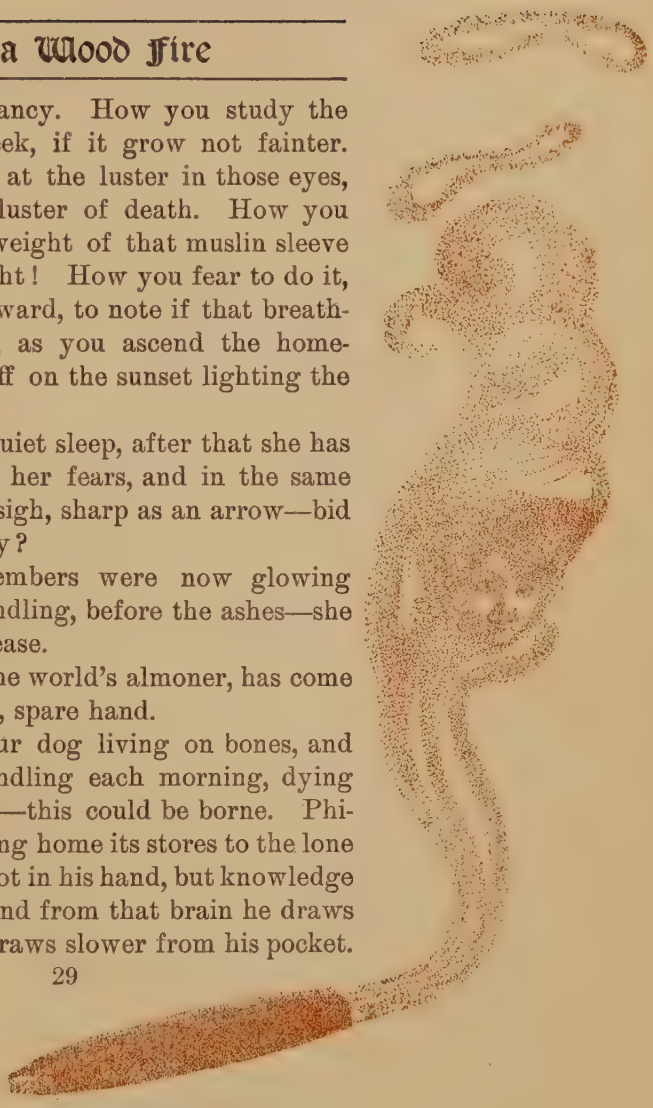
lose not its buoyancy. How you study the color on that cheek, if it grow not fainter. How you tremble at the luster in those eyes, if it be not the luster of death. How you totter under the weight of that muslin sleeve —a phantom weight! How you fear to do it, and yet press forward, to note if that breathing be quickened, as you ascend the home-heights, to look off on the sunset lighting the plain.

Is your sleep, quiet sleep, after that she has whispered to you her fears, and in the same breath—soft as a sigh, sharp as an arrow—bid you bear it bravely?

Perhaps—the embers were now glowing fresher, a little kindling, before the ashes—she triumphs over disease.

But, Poverty, the world's almoner, has come to you with ready, spare hand.

Alone, with your dog living on bones, and you, on hope—kindling each morning, dying slowly each night—this could be borne. Philosophy would bring home its stores to the lone man. Money is not in his hand, but knowledge is in his brain! and from that brain he draws out faster, as he draws slower from his pocket.



He remembers; and on remembrance he can live for days, and weeks. The garret, if a garret covers him, is rich in fancies. The rain if it pelts, pelts only him used to rain-peltings. And his dog crouches not in dread, but in companionship. His crust he divides with him, and laughs. He crowns himself with glorious memories of Cervantes, though he begs: if he nights it under the stars, he dreams heaven-sent dreams of the prisoned, and homeless Galileo.

He hums old sonnets, and snatches of poor Jonson's plays. He chants Dryden's odes, and dwells on Otway's rhyme. He reasons with Bolingbroke or Diogenes, as the humor takes him; and laughs at the world, for the world thank Heaven, has left him alone!

Keep your money, old misers, and your palaces, old princes—the world is mine!

I care not, fortune, what you me deny.
You cannot rob me of free nature's grace,
You cannot shut the windows of the sky;
You cannot bar my constant feet to trace
The woods and lawns, by living streams, at eve.
Let health, my nerves and finer fibers brace,
And I, their toys, to the great children, leave.
Of fancy, reason, virtue, nought can we bereave!

But—if not alone?

If *she* is clinging to you for support, for consolation, for home, for life—she, reared in luxury perhaps, is faint for bread?

Then, the iron enters the soul; then the nights darken under any sky light. Then the days grow long, even in the solstice of winter.

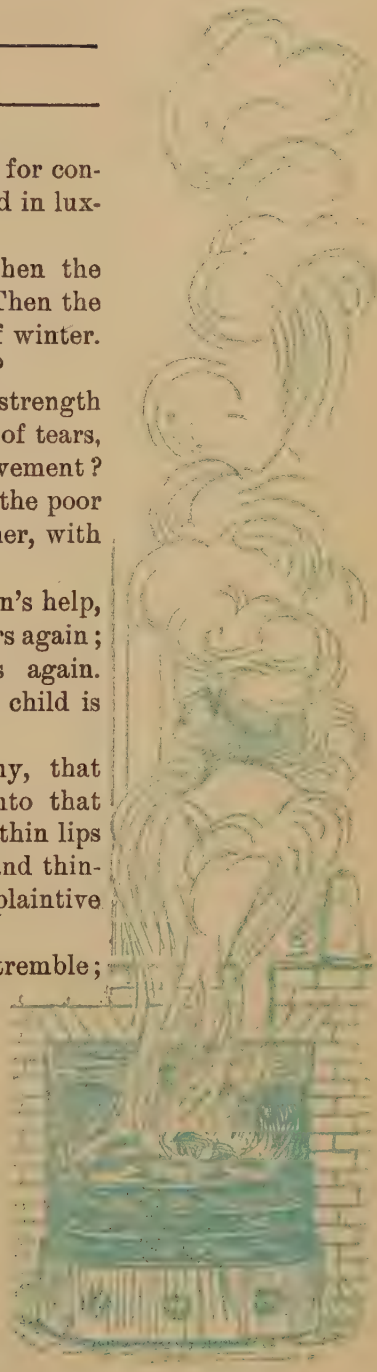
She may not complain; what then?

Will your heart grow strong, if the strength of her love can dam up the fountains of tears, and the tied tongue not tell of bereavement? Will it solace you to find her parting the poor treasure of food you have stolen for her, with begging, foodless children?

But this ill, strong hands, and heaven's help, will put down. Wealth again; flowers again; patrimonial acres again; brightness again. But your little Bessie, your favorite child is pining.

Would to God! you say in agony, that wealth could bring fulness again into that blanched cheek, or round those little thin lips once more; but it cannot. Thinner and thinner they grow; plaintive and more plaintive her sweet voice.

"Dear Bessie"—and your tones tremble;



you feel that she is on the edge of the grave? Can you pluck her back? Can endearments stay her? Business is heavy, away from the loved child; home, you go, to fondle while yet time is left—but *this* time you are too late. She is gone. She cannot hear you: she cannot thank you for the violets you put within her stiff white hand.

And then—the grassy mound—the cold shadow of head-stone!

The wind, growing with the night, is rattling at the window panes, and whistles dismally. I wipe a tear, and in the interval of my reverie, thank God, that I am no such mourner.

But gaiety, snail-footed, creeps back to the household. All is bright again:

> The violet bed's not sweeter
> Than the delicious breath marriage sends forth.

Her lip is rich and full; her cheek delicate as a flower. Her frailty doubles your love.

And the little one she clasps—frail too—too frail: the boy you had set your hopes and heart on. You have watched him growing, ever prettier, ever winning more and more

upon your soul. The love you bore to him when he first lisped names—your name and hers—has doubled in strength now that he asks innocently to be taught of this, of that, and promises you by that quick curiosity that flashes in his eye, a mind full of intelligence.

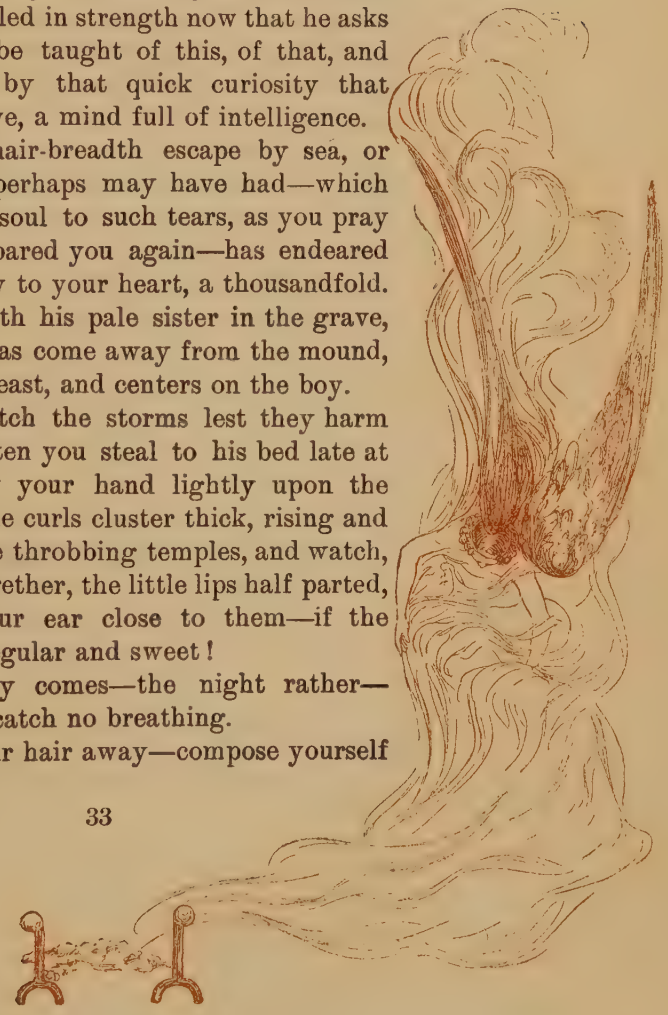
And some hair-breadth escape by sea, or flood, that he perhaps may have had—which unstrung your soul to such tears, as you pray God may be spared you again—has endeared the little fellow to your heart, a thousandfold.

And, now with his pale sister in the grave, all *that* love has come away from the mound, where worms feast, and centers on the boy.

How you watch the storms lest they harm him! How often you steal to his bed late at night, and lay your hand lightly upon the brow, where the curls cluster thick, rising and falling with the throbbing temples, and watch, for minutes together, the little lips half parted, and listen—your ear close to them—if the breathing be regular and sweet!

But the day comes—the night rather—when you can catch no breathing.

Aye, put your hair away—compose yourself—listen again.



No, there is nothing!

Put your hand now to his brow—damp indeed—but not with helpful night sleep: it is not your hand, no, do not deceive yourself—it is your loved boy's forehead that is so cold; and your loved boy will never speak to you again—never play again—he is dead!

Oh, the tears—the tears: what blessed things are tears! Never fear now to let them fall on his forehead, or his lip, lest you waken him! Clasp him—clasp him harder—you cannot hurt, you cannot waken him! Lay him down, gently or not, it is the same; he is stiff; he is stark and cold.

But courage is elastic; it is our pride. It recovers itself easier, thought I, than these embers will get into blaze again.

But courage, and patience, faith, and hope have their limit. Blessed be the man who escapes such trial as will determine limit!

To a lone man it comes not near; for how can trial take hold where there is nothing by which to try?

A funeral? You reason with philosophy. A graveyard? You read Hervey and muse upon the wall. A friend dies? You sigh,

you pat your dog—it is over. Losses? You retrench—you light your pipe—it is forgotten. Calumny? You laugh—you sleep.

But with that childless wife clinging to you in love and sorrow—what then?

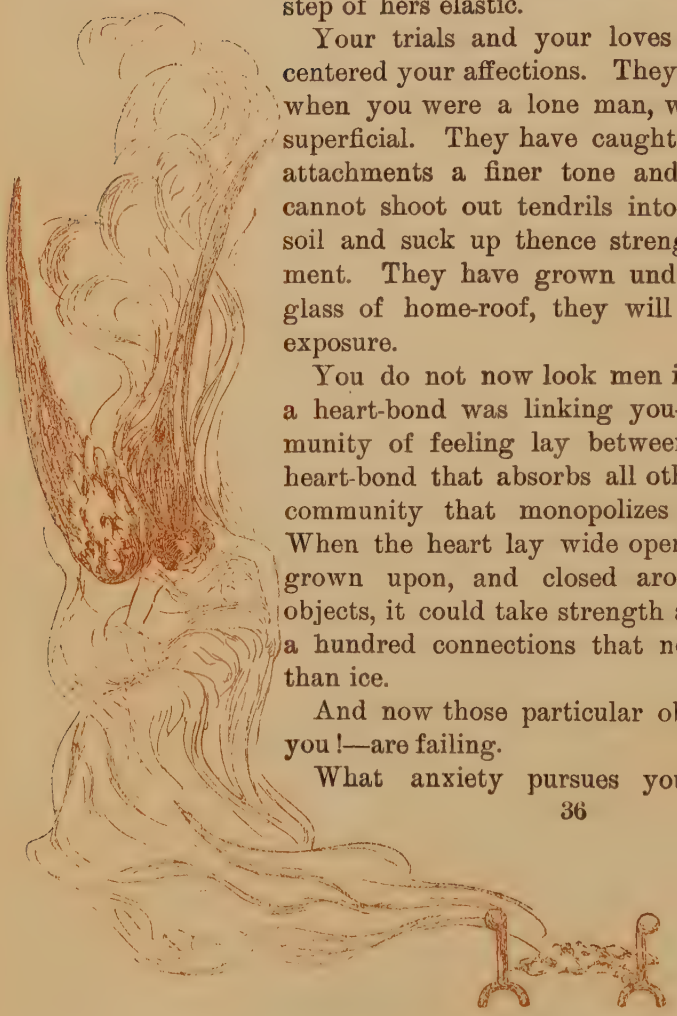
Can you take down Seneca now, and coolly blow the dust from the leaf-tops? Can you crimp your lip with Voltaire? Can you smoke idly, your feet dangling with the ivies, your thoughts all waving fancies upon a churchyard wall—a wall that borders the grave of your boy?

Can you amuse yourself by turning stinging Martial into rhyme? Can you pat your dog, and seeing him wakeful and kind, say, "It is enough"? Can you sneer at calumny, and sit by your fire dozing?

Blessed, thought I again, is the man who escapes such trial as will measure the limit of patience and the limit of courage!

But the trial comes—colder and colder were growing the embers.

That wife, over whom your love broods, is fading. Not beauty fading—that, now that your heart is wrapped in her being, would be nothing.



She sees with quick eye your dawning apprehension, and she tries hard to make that step of hers elastic.

Your trials and your loves together have centered your affections. They are not now as when you were a lone man, wide-spread and superficial. They have caught from domestic attachments a finer tone and touch. They cannot shoot out tendrils into barren world-soil and suck up thence strengthening nutriment. They have grown under the forcing-glass of home-roof, they will not now bear exposure.

You do not now look men in the face as if a heart-bond was linking you—as if a community of feeling lay between. There is a heart-bond that absorbs all others; there is a community that monopolizes your feeling. When the heart lay wide open, before it had grown upon, and closed around particular objects, it could take strength and cheer from a hundred connections that now seem colder than ice.

And now those particular objects—alas for you!—are failing.

What anxiety pursues you! How you

struggle to fancy—there is no danger; how she struggles to persuade you—there is no danger!

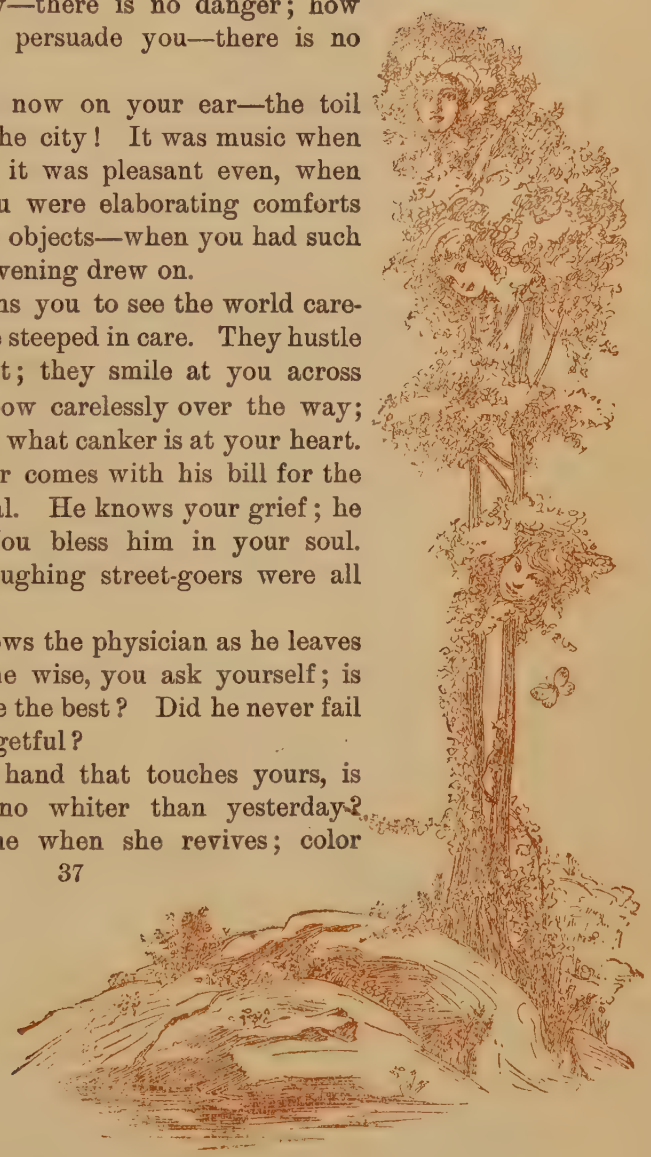
How it grates now on your ear—the toil and turmoil of the city! It was music when you were alone; it was pleasant even, when from the din you were elaborating comforts for the cherished objects—when you had such sweet escape as evening drew on.

Now it maddens you to see the world careless while you are steeped in care. They hustle you in the street; they smile at you across the table; they bow carelessly over the way; they do not know what canker is at your heart.

The undertaker comes with his bill for the dead boy's funeral. He knows your grief; he is respectful. You bless him in your soul. You wish the laughing street-goers were all undertakers.

Your eye follows the physician as he leaves your house: is he wise, you ask yourself; is he prudent? is he the best? Did he never fail—is he never forgetful?

And now the hand that touches yours, is it no thinner—no whiter than yesterday? Sunny days come when she revives; color



comes back; she breathes freer; she picks flowers; she meets you with a smile. Hope lives again.

But the next day of storm she is fallen. She cannot talk even; she presses your hand.

You hurry away from business before your time. What matter for clients—who is to reap the rewards? What matter for fame—whose eye will it brighten? What matter for riches—whose is the inheritance?

You find her propped with pillows; she is looking over a little picture-book bethumbed by the dear boy she has lost. She hides it in her chair; she has pity on you.

——Another day of revival, when the spring sun shines, and flowers open out of doors; she leans on your arm, and strolls into the garden where the first birds are singing. Listen to them with her—what memories are in bird-songs! You need not shudder at her tears—they are tears of thanksgiving. Press the hand that lies light upon your arm, and you, too, thank God, while yet you may!

You are early home—mid-afternoon. Your step is not light; it is heavy, terrible.

They have sent for you.

She is lying down; her eyes half closed; her breathing long and interrupted.

She hears you; her eyes open; you put your hand in hers; yours trembles—hers does not. Her lips move; it is your name.

"Be strong," she says, "God will help you!"

She presses harder your hand: "Adieu!"

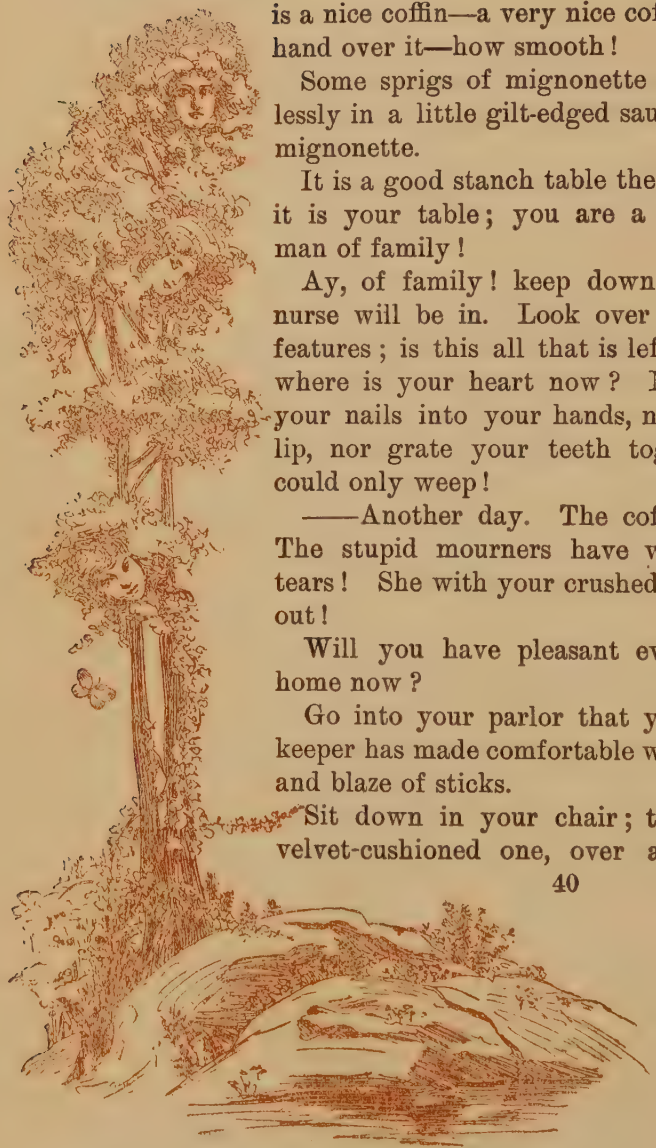
A long breath—another; you are alone again. No tears now; poor man! You cannot find them!

——Again home early. There is a smell of varnish in your house. A coffin is there; they have clothed the body in decent grave clothes, and the undertaker is screwing down the lid, slipping round on tiptoe. Does he fear to waken her?

He asks you a simple question about the inscription upon the plate, rubbing it with his coat cuff. You look him straight in the eye; you motion to the door; you dare not speak.

He takes up his hat and glides out stealthful as a cat.

The man has done his work well for all. It



is a nice coffin—a very nice coffin! Pass your hand over it—how smooth!

Some sprigs of mignonette are lying carelessly in a little gilt-edged saucer. She loved mignonette.

It is a good stanch table the coffin rests on; it is your table; you are a housekeeper—a man of family!

Ay, of family! keep down outcry, or the nurse will be in. Look over at the pinched features; is this all that is left of her? And where is your heart now? No, don't thrust your nails into your hands, nor mangle your lip, nor grate your teeth together. If you could only weep!

——Another day. The coffin is gone out. The stupid mourners have wept—what idle tears! She with your crushed heart, has gone out!

Will you have pleasant evenings at your home now?

Go into your parlor that your prim housekeeper has made comfortable with clean hearth and blaze of sticks.

Sit down in your chair; there is another velvet-cushioned one, over against yours—

empty. You press your fingers on your eyeballs, as if you would press out something that hurt the brain; but you cannot. Your head leans upon your hand; your eye rests upon the flashing blaze.

Ashes always come after blaze.

Go now into the room where she was sick—softly, lest the prim housekeeper come after.

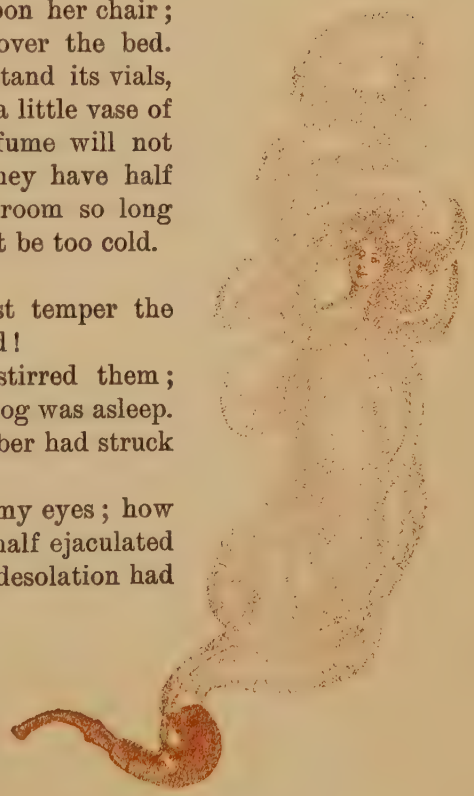
They have put new dimity upon her chair; they have hung new curtains over the bed. They have removed from the stand its vials, and silver bell; they have put a little vase of flowers in their place; the perfume will not offend the sick sense now. They have half opened the window, that the room so long closed may have air. It will not be too cold.

She is not there.

——Oh, God! thou who dost temper the wind to the shorn lamb—be kind!

The embers were dark; I stirred them; there was no sign of life. My dog was asleep. The clock in my tenant's chamber had struck one.

I dashed a tear or two from my eyes; how they came there I know not. I half ejaculated a prayer of thanks, that such desolation had



not yet come nigh me; and a prayer of hope —that it might never come.

In a half hour more, I was sleeping soundly. My reverie was ended.

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